

KAL 007 Massacre

Hersh Uses Episode to Condemn U.S.

Seymour Hersh, the author of a new book on Korean Air Lines Flight 007, *The Target Is Destroyed*, has performed an interesting trick. Whereas one might think it would be extremely difficult to turn an incident in which the Soviets shoot down an unarmed civilian airliner, killing all 269 passengers and crew, into a black mark against the United States, Hersh, by Jove, has almost managed to accomplish this extraordinary feat. Not quite, however.

The Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist made headlines recently when the media reported on an article he had written for the *Atlantic Monthly*, drawn from his book published by Random House, in which he fundamentally argues two propositions. He concedes that the Soviets were incorrect when they charged that KAL Flight 007 was a "spy" plane:

But he goes on to suggest, in typical Hersh fashion, that the Soviets had good reason to suspect that it was, and that it was the Reagan Administration, with its harsh, anti-Communist rhetoric, that almost turned a tragedy into a major crisis.

Both the *Atlantic* article and the book are filled with statements and innuendo hinting that the Administration was misled in egregious ways by U.S. intelligence reports devised by "hard-liners," those with a supposedly warped sense of what the Soviets are really like.

Secretary of State George Shultz, whom Hersh implies hoped "to improve his standing with the President and the White House hard-liners," supposedly became something of a victim of cooked or distorted facts as he took the lead in waging a hard-hitting, anti-Soviet campaign over the airline episode.

Before Shultz decided to speak out strongly on the issue — just hours after the Soviets had shot down the airliner on Sept. 1, 1983—he wanted last-minute reassurances: Was the intelligence community convinced that the Soviet interceptor had brought down the plane, and that the aircraft, which had strayed into Soviet airspace over Sakhalin, was not on an American reconnaissance mission? He received those reassurances from, in Hersh's view, a suspicious source: CIA Director William Casey. As Hersh relates it:

"There was at least one last-minute conversation between Shultz and Casey that morning [September 1], perhaps more. Casey was relying heavily on Fritz Ermath, the CIA's national intelligence officer (NIO) for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, who was known throughout the bureaucracy for his rigid anti-Soviet ideology and for his propensity during crises to consistently attribute the worst motives to the Soviets. Ermath found more than enough evidence to conclude that the Soviet interceptor pilot had identified the aircraft as civilian before shooting it down.

"His biases melded perfectly with those of William Casey, and it was Casey's assessment that emerged as the most important that morning, since he served not only as CIA director but also as distorted intelligence reports, "was completely convincing." And much of virtually the whole world was taken in.

The truth, in Hersh's view, was largely different. What really happened, Hersh would have his readers believe, is that some really "good" intelligence experts felt that the Soviets, in fact, had made a terrible error, having confused the Boeing 747 passenger plane with the RC-135, a U.S. reconnaissance aircraft that frequently monitored Soviet activities in the vicinity of the KAL shoot-down.

Because the downing of Flight 007 was almost certainly a mistake, rather than a deliberate effort to shoot down a civilian airliner, says Hersh, the Soviets "saw the American leaders as dishonorable men who could be counted on to manipulate the truth in a crisis."

Administration officials "had rushed to judgment over Flight 007" because "their strong hostility to communism had led them to misread the intelligence and then, much more ominously, to look the other way when better information became available.

"Those who ran the American government did not want to learn that the Soviets had honestly been confused and panic-stricken about the enemy intruder, and so they continued to believe what they wanted." A tragic mistake by Moscow, Hersh adds, "was escalated into a tinder-box issue on the basis of misunderstood and distorted intelligence...."

Hersh's view, as is so frequently the case, is stun-